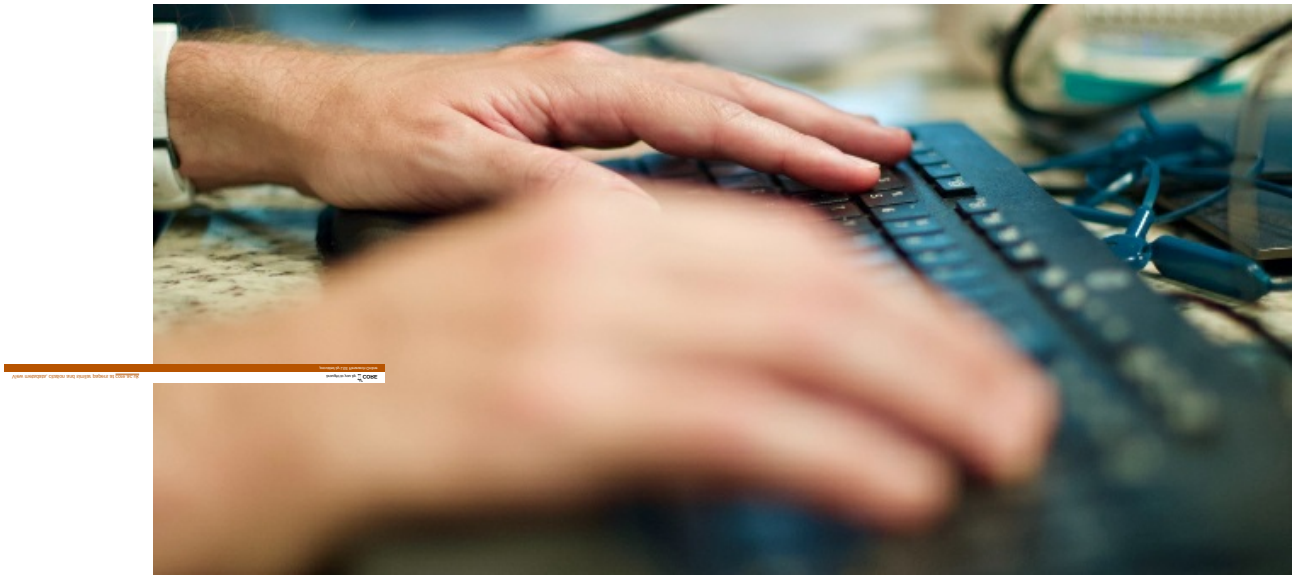
# A thin silver lining in a year of uncertainty for professionals with disabilities



2020 Disability History Month presents an eerily strange opportunity to highlight a thin silver lining in a year consumed with uncertainty and despondency for individuals with disabilities. This blog entry hopes to honour the occasion and speak to the reader via a quasi-first-person perspective that may well reflect the experiences of a range of professionals with disabilities. It seeks to characterise different facets of past and present occupational environments that affect the work life of people with disabilities. Drawing on scientific evidence and the experiences of professionals with disabilities, an attempt is made to outline a vision of a practically possible inclusive future that will benefit corporations and society on a macro and micro level.

**The R**

Owing to the high transmissibility and rapid spread of the coronavirus and our limited epidemiological understanding of this novel disease, our nation has had to initiate radical containment measures, with profound effects on our normal way of life (Hadjidemetriou et al., 2020). The innumerable repercussions of the pandemic have eclipsed our very existence, with the poor, the sick and the elderly most deleteriously impacted (Bateman, 2020; Dahab et al., 2020). Invariably, infection incidence, disease and ensuing mortality rates have consumed the spotlight (Iob et al., 2020), with an emergent awareness of an impending cultural, economic and occupational fallout (McKee & Stuckler, 2020). In the workplace, many have been forced to face increased social isolation, a blurred work-life divide, daily distractions that interfere with productivity and overall effectiveness, a disconnect (literally and figuratively), with reduced agency and increased demand for autonomy. All these detrimental developments unfortunately concur with reduced promotional and training opportunities (Schur et al., 2020). Needless to say, this is a cataclysmic period for so many.

**Lucky me**

Too little attention has been given to (dare I say it) the few positive corollaries of the pandemic – the silver lining: plausible long-term benefits for future organisational operations, particularly for frequently marginalised groups, such as professionals with disabilities (PWD). With millions of people sheltered in place, the pandemic has led to a major unexpected upswing in hybrid working (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Some have experienced it as a significant emotional burden, an inconvenience of practicalities or a mere nuisance. However, especially for PWD the present normalcy of working from home has been an unimagined blessing and a welcome mutiny against traditional working structures. The principal advantage of this “new normal” lies in the new-found flexibility towards remote work options (Schur et al., 2020) and a possible narrowing of the ‘power distance’ between formally on-site workers and their remote colleagues (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

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In order to manage multifarious health and/or mobility concerns, while effectively balancing work obligations, PWD value and (more often than not) require flexibility to remain in the workforce (Ali et al., 2011). The call for flexibility typically centres around working-time autonomy (i.e. how and when work is performed), together with abating one's commute (Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019). Thus, effective participation in the workforce is often contingent on an employer's willingness to allow for and provide flexible working conditions, which the current capricious climate has commanded. For many businesses, hybrid working has been thrust upon them and their staff. For better or for worse, professionals have had to adapt to this new terrain. While this may be a novel issue to navigate for most, it is a familiar challenge to professionals with a disability. Hence, with a long-endured 'waiting to exhale', this wave of hybrid working practices has offered PWD a notable relief and even given a glimmer of hope to those who have not yet been able to overcome ableist barriers to break into the professional arena.

Working from home had been much frowned upon pre-pandemic. There was a culture of mistrust and a fear of diminished productivity, with an implicit question mark over whether employees were truly working from home. Fundamentally, it was seen as a lesser form of working practice (Williamson et al., 2020), despite the fact that for many PWD, hybrid working practices are the only viable option to remain in the professional workforce (Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019) and avoid underemployment or burnout. Earlier arguments against hybrid working as a reasonable adjustment may now be undercut by the current provisions made for employees to work at home during the pandemic as an assurance of their safety and wellbeing. It may no longer be a formidable objection that hybrid work averts essential job function, provided there is no deterioration in work quality or efficiency over the pandemic (Schur et al., 2020). Thus, while the pandemic has been horrendous, unnerving and problematic in countless way, it has inadvertently presented a silver lining for PWD by normalising hybrid working practices.

**Marginalised me**

The Department for Work and Pensions' (2017). White Paper: "Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Employment and Disability" set ambitious targets to passage one million individuals with disabilities into employment to narrow the disproportionate gap that has a disparate number of PWD un- or underemployed. Yet, to date, this target remains unmet (ONS, 2020). Despite a pre-pandemic growth in the number of PWD returning to work, there remained a 28.1% employment gap, with redundancies more likely among this group and pervasive reports of job insecurity (GOV.UK, 2019; Mitra & Kruse, 2016). The onset of the pandemic has proliferated all forms of inequalities, including the erosion of rights and legal duties in employment (Tidball, 2020). Yet a relatively unnoticed crisis has been the disparate loss of employment for PWD (11.2%; compared to a 6.7% decrease for their counterparts). Indeed, it seems a pattern of 'last hired, first fired' has emerged (Schur et al., 2020) Quite bleak really – particularly in view of reaching the 10-year milestone of the 2010 Equality Act that made it illegal to discriminate against the disabled (GOV.UK, 2020)

PWD have had to adapt to a changing global capitalist system with increasing competition and vulnerability to market shocks, which exasperate issues of employment and security (Berghs & Dyson, 2020). Further troubling is that PWD are more likely to be on part-time or temporary contracts, due to the need to balance health and mobility issues. This depicts a picture of lower economic recourse, fewer assets and a lower margin of disposable income for a significant subset of the population (Luu, 2018; Schur, 2002a). A paucity of economic resources can exclude people from mainstream society (Ball et al., 2006), diminish social capital (Schur, 2002b), stunt independence and leave one with a lessened sense of efficacy (Ali et al., 2011) Jointly, these factors may result in inferior life outcomes (Yang et al., 2020) and cumulative contributions to disease pathogenesis (McKee & Stuckler, 2020; Steptoe & Zaninotto, 2020)

Therefore, recent changes to working practices provide a unique opportunity to scrutinise the current structure with a view to increasing inclusion and narrowing disparities post-pandemic. Furthermore, albeit moderate, notable progress has been made since the 2010 Equality Act (GOV.UK, 2020) and there remains policy interest in expanding hybrid working options for PWD (Schur et al., 2020), as there are substantial ways in which PWD are still marginalised.

**Guarded me**

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There remains work to do to encourage individuals with a disability back into the workforce (Ali et al., 2011) Negative self-perceptions are frequently grafted onto the psyche of PWD, as a by-product of unconstructive stereotypes and insurmountable difficulties to meet societal norms presuming full bodily and mental ability. This of course is not helped by the search for and interpretation of information that supports a priori beliefs, solidifying a confirmation bias that sustains negative self-views (Jones, 1997; Luu, 2018). Moreover, feelings of insecurity and self-doubt might also be deeply internalised. A wall of reluctance can be built on unfounded feelings of inadequacy, coupled with reduced exposure to the workplace that undermines confidence and conditions a milieu for unrealistic self-expectations. Further, due to the often-increased need for security and stability, PWD tend to be more risk averse and avoid disturbing the status quo. This can result in missed opportunities and the neglect of a potentially progressive career trajectory (Ali et al., 2011). Essentially, the subtly composed and rehearsed fallacy of "being less than" needs to be erased, so that a new narrative with a more realistic self-image can be formed.

**Disadvantaged me**

PWD often face negative stereotypical attitudes and unrealistic expectations that have the potential to limit their career growth and attenuate the quality of their work experiences (Beatty et al., 2019). Critical employer inclinations and unwelcoming corporate cultures further institutionalise the stigmatised experience of PWD (Ali et al., 2011) A shrinking number of employers perceive reasonable adjustments as a burden and annoyance; a mandatory tick box exercise, actioned out of legislative obligation, rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion and broader egalitarian values. Alas, even interventions intended to moderate inequities and make the work experience of PWD equivalent to that of their counterparts can serve as a marker of perceived preferential treatment. Such erroneous perceptions can also harvest feelings of jealously and an 'unreasonable resentment' among colleagues, which can reduce morale overall (Dipboye & Colella, 2013; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008). These, collectively, may leave PWD with a sense of guilt and fear of reproach, resulting in a reluctance to access the very supports that are intended to help them to successfully assimilate.

**Pragmatic me**

Moderated workforce participation poses an immediate threat to the economy; attenuated economic activity reduces financial circulation and tax revenues, all of which ultimately limits funds available for public-services and contributes to tax increases among the working population. Therefore, it is in the interest of society broadly to integrate as many individuals with a disability as possible back into the workforce, who would otherwise be dependent on social welfare benefits (McKee & Stuckler, 2020). It is arguably a corporate social responsibility for organisations to proactively encourage and support disabled people back into the workforce, as this would benefit society broadly. However, it also has direct commercial benefits and PWD are a "largely untapped human resource" (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008, p. 256; Luu, 2018). Studies support the claim that employers with higher rates of PWD workers enjoy a greater commitment to the company, with better adherence to individual duties, higher productivity and less offset costs relating to absenteeism or workplace accidents (e.g. Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019; Hatton, 2015; Morgan, 2004).

At the same time, the concerns of employers understandably surround performance, costs and the reaction of stakeholders (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008). Given the extensive range of disabilities one may face, it is abundantly clear that some employers do not have the means nor institutional capacity to support some PWD back into work, which is not necessarily a reflection of their values, but a mere issue of practicality. Therefore, the ability to reduce current disparities must be driven also by policy change at governmental level. Highlighting the societal import of higher PWD employment rates, there is need for awareness exercises and objective data that refute purported to cost detriments, alongside developed or expanded schemes that incentivise and support companies with the practicalities and, often minimal, cost adjustments of hiring people with disabilities (Disability Rights UK, 2016). Also, more directly, governmental funding and resources should be allocated to companies who need them to offer employment opportunities to qualified PWD.

**Grateful me**

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Based on the current trajectory, Bill Gates' turn of the century prediction of 50% of the working population working from home by 2050 is convincing. Information and communications technology have created unprecedented and transformational efficiency and effectiveness opportunities for both employer and employee, with new possibilities for rapid information dissemination and responsiveness. Furthermore, with the onslaught of corporate restructuring and downsizing initiatives, increased marketplace competition, global market expansion and the limited concentration of specialist talent in single locations, numerous pressures exist that stimulate an evaluation of traditional structures toward hybrid working options (Morgan, 2004).

Without stigma or judgement or indignity, the new normalcy of hybrid working has advantaged PWD who are each uniquely tasked with overcoming very specific barriers to entry and employment retention. For instance, those with mobility issues are now interviewed via an online platform, so can be seen for their skills and attributes first, rather than being judged (implicitly or otherwise) by their aids. Equally, those with invisible chronic conditions may avoid the struggle and scrutiny faced when having to commute by public transportation. Neurodivergent individuals need not explain their restlessness, as they have the personal space to gain composure. The sight impaired are less interrupted by others distracting their guide dog as they work. The hearing impaired can read subtitles during, for example, Zoom meetings, rather than being avoided or (arguably worse) shouted at in-person. Ailing, yet mentally astute professionals can remain close to medical equipment and home-administered therapeutics. Cancellation of daytime clinical appointments and exasperations of their conditions can be better avoided (Schur et al., 2020). Since hybrid working is likely to remain the 'new normal' for the foreseeable future, people with learning, mental, physical and physiological disabilities can better compartmentalise their complex lives at times convenient to themselves – without fear of reproach, condemnation and denigration. In many ways, the proliferation of hybrid working practices is a welcomed game changer, with an unexpected boost of hope and confidence for PWD (Williamson et al., 2020). Each of these developments can mean substantial relief for a PWD and, therefore, presents an occasion for gratitude.

**Serendipitous we – a silver lining for all of us**

Despite a scarcity of empirical evidence providing an understanding of lived-experiences (Igeltjørn & Habib, 2020), the merits of hybrid working have long been well-established (e.g. Bloom et al., 2015; Morgan, 2004; Williamson et al., 2020). Still, cynicism towards hybrid work remained entrenched in the pre-pandemic working structure, also compromising the perceived value of PWD. However, the pandemic has inadvertently challenged traditional conventions that will reshape perceptions, likely resulting in micro and macro shifts in the post-pandemic world of work (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). The potential enduring transformation in attitudes that normalise hybrid working practices are a unique opportunity to level the playing field for many an individual with a disability.

The litmus test comes at the end of the pandemic. It is yet to be seen how hybrid working practices will evolve in the aftermath of this crisis, as the economic, social and occupational systems recover. Still, it provides organisations with the occasion to reflect upon and undergo a volte-face on how duties can be undertaken and briefs accomplished at work (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). There are already an increasing number of organisations noticing a more efficient, less exhausted workforce, with signs of enhanced creativity, innovation, organisational commitment and job satisfaction among their employees as a by-product/derivative of the pandemic (e.g. Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019; Maurer & Maurer, 2020; Schur et al., 2020). It is also worth mentioning the notable cost savings to organisations, coupled with a nuanced agility and adaptability that outshine earlier restrained measures taken toward inclusion (Raišienė et al., 2020)

To this point, an organisation's newly forged appreciation of the long-established benefits to hybrid working could open the door to broader inclusion measures, where earlier HR practices have made little advancement (Luu, 2018). Thus, the pandemic, by proxy, could pave the way for increased workplace participation and security for PWD.

A 'career over job' philosophy could be advanced with improved career progression opportunities and prevention of premature exiting. These together could reduce the wage gap, increase the quality of life and empower PWD (Crudden et al., 2017). for the benefit of society at large – that is, for all of us!



*Notes:*

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